

HOH OHO

"Tout le monde est saint avant qu'il est touché par les inéquilibres de notre société. On a crée beacoup de besoins artificiels. Ils augmentent notre fragilité. L'être humain est limité dans sa compréhension. Il reste la rêve, l'espoir"--Johanne Cantin.

In 1973, Lise Portelance was hired as a secretary at Montreal's central post office at the corner of Peel and St. Jacques. It was called "le bureau de rebus", because it was the depository for all of Quebec's "undeliverable mail"--letters that had neither a correct address nor a return address, and were headed for the garbage. In December, Mme Portelance noticed that many of these letters were addressed to Père Noel. It bothered her that they would be thrown out, and not answered. She had two small boys herself. So the following year, she persuaded two other workers in her office to sort out the "lettres mortes" that were addressed to Père Noel, bring them home, and write answers to them after their own children were in bed. They answered all 600 of the ones that came in that year, 1974.

Those 600 children must have let their friends know that Père Noel answered letters. The following year, 3,000 letters addressed to him arrived at the Peel St. post office. Mme Portelance recruited another dozen post office volunteers to help answer them on their own free time--managers, secretaries, mail sorters, delivery men. They started to call her "Marie Christmas". She called the volunteers "mes lutins" ("my elves").

That started an avalanche. By Christmas 1982, 280,000 letters arrived, now half of them in English. Marie Christmas arranged for the English ones to be sent to volunteers in the main post office in Toronto. But by now hundreds of them were asking for things that Santa Claus could not easily provide: missing relatives, healthy lungs, full meals, suicide pills, freedom from physical abuse, world peace. Some of them were from unemployed adults. Some from single mothers. Some from old people without friends. Thousands arrived from abroad, revealing that children in Poland, Spain, Egypt, Japan, and Vietnam believed that Père Noel lived at the North Pole, and that the North Pole was in Canada. The whole thing had become more than Lise Portelance could handle, and it looked like it would continue to grow. So in 1983, Canada Post officially adopted it by announcing to the public that any letters addressed to Santa Claus, North Pole, HOH OHO, would be answered. Thousands of volunteers were recruited from postal workers across Canada to sort out and answer Santa Claus letters with a standard printed answer in English, French and 20 other languages. Psychologists were recruited to deal with letters of desperation ("lettres pathétiques").

The avalanche continued. In 1996, Santa Claus received just over a million letters at his HOH OHO address. 300,000 were written in French. 10% of them came from adults. 10,000 elves in Canada Post--2,500 of them in Quebec--volunteered to make sure all letters were answered. It is about the only activity that the post office has undertaken in these past two decades that has not become a source of conflict in labour relations.

This is a uniquely Canadian phenomenon, and it started in Quebec. What does it reveal about the fin-de-siècle state of this country? Why this increasing need to write letters to one of our society's few remaining symbols of hope? What motivates generally cynical adults to legitimize that symbol by answering those letters in their own free time? What are the social and psychological roots of such a powerful myth?

I propose to explore these questions in a one-hour documentary film, to be made with the assistance of two gifted women--Johanne Cantin, director of Canada Post's Programme d'Aide aux Employés in Montreal; and Patricia Garel, child psychiatrist at l'Hôpital Ste. Justine.

Johanne Cantin is a psychologist who helps postal workers in Montreal with their personal problems. In her three years at the post office, she has found that Christmas is her heaviest season. The number of employees with stress-related problems always increases then, just as "lettres pathétiques" start arriving for Père Noel to answer. 900 of them. They are also her responsibility. Last year, she put an ad in the journal "Psychologie Québec" asking for help in answering these letters, and 40 volunteers replied. She provided them with a guide-book she had prepared for inside workers the previous year. Her sample replies in this guide-book reveal an extraordinary talent for words of understanding, reassurance and beauty--nourished by the good influence Père Noel has had on her own 7-year-old son.

Some letters are so desperate that they need psychiatric help. "Père Noel, à 15 ans, je n'en peut plus. Donnez moi le courage de me tuer." "Père Noel, viens consoler Maman, elle pleure tout le temps parce que je vais mourir de la leucémie". Johanne Cantin forwards 100 letters a year like these to Patricia Garel at l'hôpital Ste. Justine. To answer them, Garel gets help from 20 other volunteers in the psychiatric department of that hospital, but her most inspired helper last year was her 8-year-old daughter Juliette. She was able to help her mother like no-one else to compose letters that made each child feel special, and that helped them come to terms with their problems without promising miracles.

Dr. Garel's memories of childhood Christmases are the happiest of her life, and she has a profound respect and fascination for the myth of Père Noel. She is willing to introduce me to her daughter Juliette, and to collaborate in using the resources of the Ste. Justine library to research the historical and psychological roots of the myth.

There is a natural opening for this film--the Montreal Père Noel parade in mid-November. Immediately after the parade, Père Noel comes to the main post office sorting plant, which is now located on Ottawa Street. There he celebrates, along with his hundreds of Montreal elves, the opening of his letter-writing service at the North Pole, HOH OHO. Letters start to flood in some two weeks later, at which time les lutins de Père Noel gather at the change of each shift to divide up the letters that have been sorted during the previous shift.

I propose to spend three weeks researching and scripting a bilingual film that would focus on one sympathetic character drawn from each of the following groups: (1) the children who write Père Noel; (2) the adults who write him; (3) the postal workers who sort and answer the normal letters; (4) the psychologists and psychiatrists who answer les lettres pathétiques. All of last year's 900 lettres pathétiques have been kept, and both Johanne Cantin and Dr. Garel think it would be possible to find interesting characters from among them who would be willing to collaborate.

There is an international angle worth exploring. 10% of last year's one million letters came from abroad. The country from which the greatest number of them came was the former Soviet state of Lithuania. In 1990, Montreal publisher Alain Stanké, of Lithuanian descent, was in the Baltic republic as a member of the international electoral commission. He was struck by the country's destitution, and encouraged children to write to Père Noel in Canada. An average of 6,000 letters a year have arrived ever since. Canada Post forwards them to a Lithuanian Catholic order in Montreal called Sisters of Immaculate Conception. With the help of Montreal's 20,000 Lithuanians, the Sisters organize shipments of clothing and food that most of the letters call for.

Lise Portelance ("Marie Christmas") is a possible character. She retired in 1995. She lives in a bungalow next to the Ste. Dorothée train station in Laval. She took the commuter train from that station to downtown Montreal for the 22 years she worked at the Peel St. post office. She now has 4 grand-children, and is still eloquent about her passion for Père Noel. She is one of several post office retirees in the "Club Heritage" of Laval who volunteered last year to help answer Père Noel letters.

It will be important for the film to maintain the magic of the myth, so that it can be viewed by adults and children alike. Before joining the post office, Johanne Cantin worked in television in Quebec City, and got to know a Père Noel who had the ability to make the magic work for people of all ages. His name was André Duquette. Maybe he could dress for the part, and play it to the full, as a leit-motif for the film.

Martin Duckworth
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